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International Arms Deals

The arms deal by which Egypt is obtaining Communist military equipment from Czechoslovakia has introduced a new factor into the already explosive armament race in the Middle East. Not only has it increased tensions between Israel and Egypt and provoked a series of border incidents that carry the threat of another Arab-Israeli war, it has also set in motion a form of arms competition which threatens the military balance in the entire Middle East, and which could have far-reaching consequences in other areas of the world.

By bartering Czech war materials for Egyptian cotton on what is termed a "purely commercial basis," the Soviet bloc has ended the monopoly of arms supply held until recently by the Western powers. For the first time, the Communists have given Egypt and other relatively weak countries the opportunity to reject Western aid without the penalty of losing their only source of munitions supply.

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Reports that the Soviet bloc is promoting arms deals with additional countries have come from widely scattered areas:

Syria and Saudi Arabia have hinted at the possibility of getting Red arms to implement their recently-signed defense pact with Egypt.

Afghanistan, which occupies a strategic position in the northern tier of states between Pakistan and the Soviet Union, has been invited to send a military mission to visit Czechoslovakia's arms factories, and has shown an interest in buying Communist equipment if it cannot obtain the military supplies it wants from the West.

The Egyptian-Czech deal reportedly calls for delivery at "bargain price" of some \$80 million worth of Soviet-type aircraft, tanks, artillery, and submarines. The quantities involved in the first shipments are relatively small, and the bulk of the equipment comes from surplus stocks of obsolescent weapons.

Yet by Middle East standards both the quality and the quantity of the arms reaching Egypt are impressive. And they probably are sufficient to upset the military balance in that area. On that ground, Israel has appealed to the United States for "significant quantities" of defensive weapons to strengthen the country against Arab attack.

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Surplus stocks of arms accumulated by the great powers after two world wars have been the chief source of supply for the majority of countries which lack armament industries of their own. Britain was for many years the chief supplier of arms to countries of the Middle East; Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and several smaller Arab states all got their military equipment from British sources. Recently France has been an important supplier of Israel, and the United States has furnished arms to Iraq under a 1954 military aid pact.

Since World War II Russia has supplied arms to its European satellites and to Red China. The Kremlin's decision to allow sale of Czechoslovak munitions outside the Communist orbit marks a new and startling departure from previous Soviet practice.

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Czechoslovakia has special qualifications for the role of Communist arms broker. Before the war she was the largest arms exporter on the European continent, and second only to Britain in the world munitions trade.

The famous Skoda works, formerly a leading supplier of arms to all parts of the world, has been nationalized (under the name of Lenin Works) and now produces Soviet-type equipment for satellite countries and for Russia itself. But Skoda also has kept up production of spare parts for western-type armament.

Whatever may be the political motives of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal, the fact that Russia has been changing over to new-type weapons makes it possible for the Reds to part with large stocks of obsolescent—but still useful—military equipment. Allen Dulles, U.S. director of foreign intelligence, recently declared that the Soviets have some four to six thousand jet planes which could be off-loaded in a general program of causing trouble throughout the world.